DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 408 025 PS 025 331

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TITLE	Family Level Processes in Children's Adaptation to School.
PUB DATE	Apr 97
NOTE	11p.; Paper presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development (62nd, Washington, DC, April 3-6, 1997).
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Academic Achievement; Competence; Early Childhood Education; *Family Environment; Kindergarten; Kindergarten Children; Parent Child Relationship; Preschool Children; School Readiness; *Social Adjustment; *Student Adjustment
IDENTIFIERS	Family Environment Scale; Parenting Styles

ABSTRACT

The study explored the relationship between mothers' and fathers' pre-kindergarten reports of family cohesion and children's academic and social competence in kindergarten and first grade, to assess the role of family level processes in children's adjustment to school. The family cohesion factor was divided into "disengaged," "cohesive," and "enmeshed" for the 84 families participating. Results showed no significant relationship between mothers' and fathers' reports of family cohesion and children's academic competence. However, in kindergarten, families rated by mothers as cohesive had children who were described by teachers as socially competent, and families rated by mothers as disengaged had children who were described by teachers as more aggressive. In first grade, families rated by mothers as enmeshed had children who were described by teachers as less socially isolated. Post hoc ANOVAs showed that in all cases, parents' perception of family cohesion were predictive of children's social adjustment to school. (AS)

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FAMILY LEVEL PROCESSES IN CHILDREN'S ADAPTATION TO SCHOOL

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Poster presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development, Washington DC (April, 1997)

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Family Cohesion = The emotional bonding that family members have toward one another (Olson, 1993). Olson's (1993) circumplex model of family systems suggests that family cohesion has a curvilinear relationship to childhood adjustment. Thus, moderate levels of family cohesion are seen as optimal for family functioning and the extremes as problematic.

Research investigating the relationship between family functioning and children's adjustment has focused primarily on examining the relationship between parenting styles assessed in parent-child dyads and children's externalizing behavior. A few researchers have begun to move 'beyond the dyad', examining the relationship between family level variables, such as family cohesion, and children's academic (Nelson, 1984) and social competence (Cumsille & Epstein, 1994).

The overwhelming majority of investigations examining the relationship between family cohesion and children's adjustment have focused on depressed adolescents' perceptions of family functioning. Repeatedly, studies have found depressed adolescents to report having less cohesive families than non-depressed adolescents (Cumsille & Epstein, 1994). The relationship between parent perceptions of family cohesion and young school-age children's adjustment has yet to be fully illuminated.

The present study explores the role of family level processes in children's adaptation to school by examining the relationship between mothers' and fathers' pre-kindergarten reports of family cohesion and children's academic and social competence in kindergarten and first grade.

METHOD

Participants

- 84 families participating in the larger Schoolchildren and their Families (SAF) Project
- Income: 75% of the participants are above the median Bay Area income
- 85% Caucasian, 15% African-American, Latino-American, Asian-American

Procedure

Prior to their child entering kindergarten, each parent completed a shortened version of the Family Environment Scale (FES) (Moos & Moos, 1981). In addition, families participated in a laboratory visit which included 3 sessions of approximately 40 minutes each: (1) mother-child alone, (2) father-child alone, and (3) the entire family (mother, father, and child). Ratings of children's adaptation to school were obtained using the Child Adaptive Behavior Inventory (CABI) (Cowan, Cohn, Cowan, & Pearson, 1996) from kindergarten and grade 1 teachers.

Measures

Family Cohesion. The cohesion, expressiveness, and conflict scales on the FES were combined to create a family cohesion factor (i.e., family relatedness, Moos & Moos, 1981). The family cohesion factor was then divided into three equivalent groups:

Disengaged Families (Low ratings on Family Cohesion):	Families promote limited intimacy and connection among family members
Cohesive Families (Moderate ratings on Family Cohesion):	Family members often help and support one another, rarely keep their feelings to themselves or fight amongst themselves.
Enmeshed Families (High ratings on Family Cohesion):	Families encourage excessive identification with family members.

Parenting Style. Mothers' and fathers' parenting styles were assessed using observers' ratings of live dyadic parent-child interaction sessions during the pre-kindergarten year (see Cowan et al., 1996). Factor analysis yielded 4 parenting style factors: (1) negative affect, (2) warmth/responsiveness, (3) engagement, and (4) structure.

Child Adaptive Behavior Inventory (CABI). Schaefer and Hunter's (1984) Child Adaptive Behavior Inventory (CABI) was adapted by Cowan and Cowan to assess the behavior of the child in the study relative to that of the other children in the classroom of the same gender (see Cowan et al., 1996). Factor analysis yielded 6 factors: (1) academic competence, (2) social competence, (3) hyperactive externalizing behavior, (4) aggressive externalizing behavior, (5) socially isolated internalizing behavior, and (6) anxious-depressed internalizing behavior.

RESULTS

Each dependent measure was analyzed using a 3 (low, medium, high family cohesion) X 2 (child gender) ANOVA with treatment condition[1] (treatment, no treatment) as a covariate. Separate but identical ANOVAs were computed for mothers' and fathers' reports of family cohesion.

Children's Academic Adaptation to School

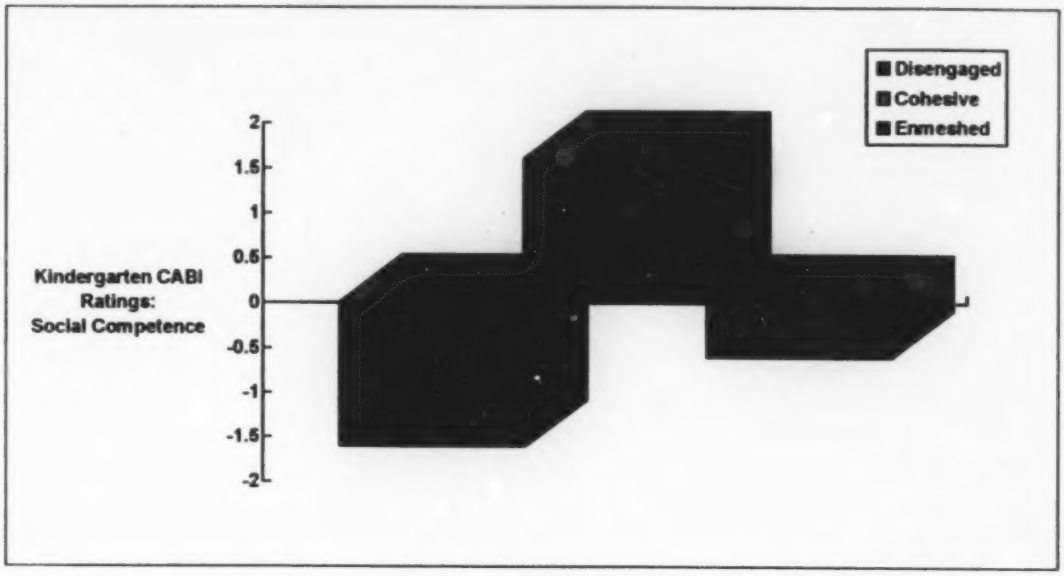
No main effects were found for either mothers' or fathers' reports of family cohesion and children's academic competence.

Children's Social Adaptation to School

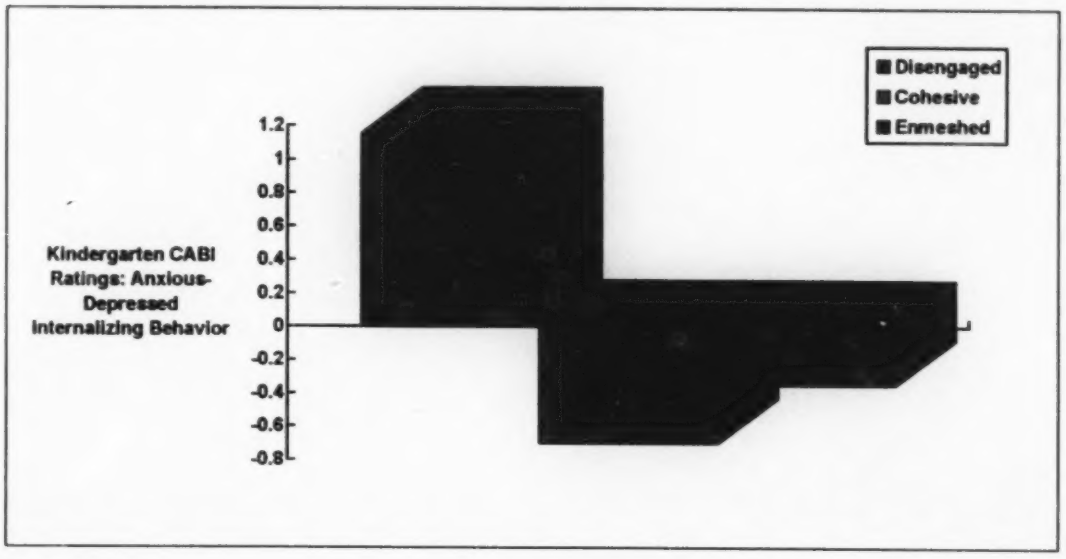
Kindergarten. Main effects for mothers' reports of cohesion in the family were found for the following measures of children's school adaptation, as assessed by the teachers:

[1] As part of the larger SAF project, 52% of the study couples participated in a 16 week couples group intervention before their eldest child entered kindergarten (see Cowan et al., 1996 for details).

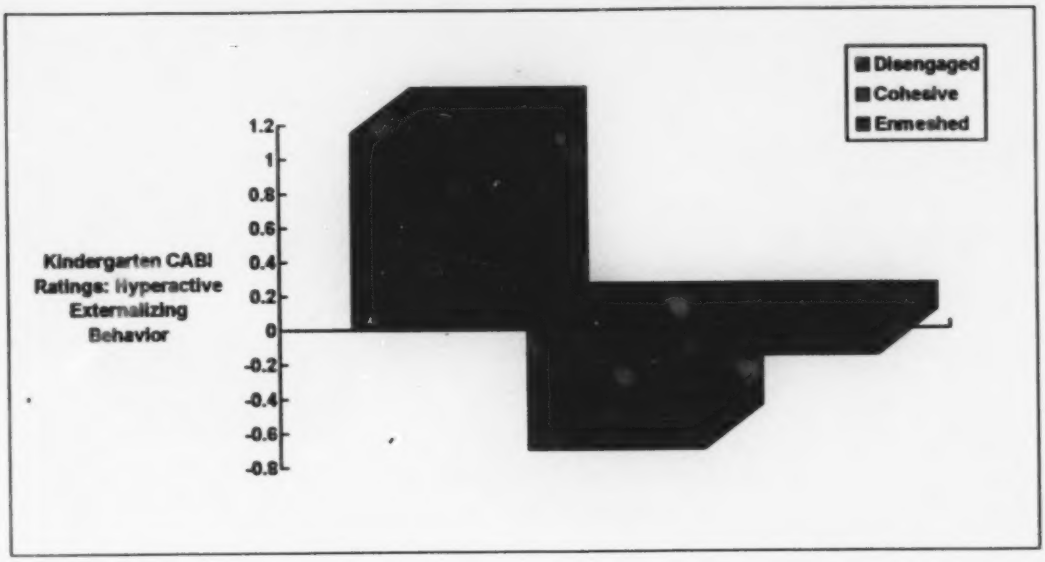
- **Social Competence, $F(2,66) = 5.06$, $p < .01$**



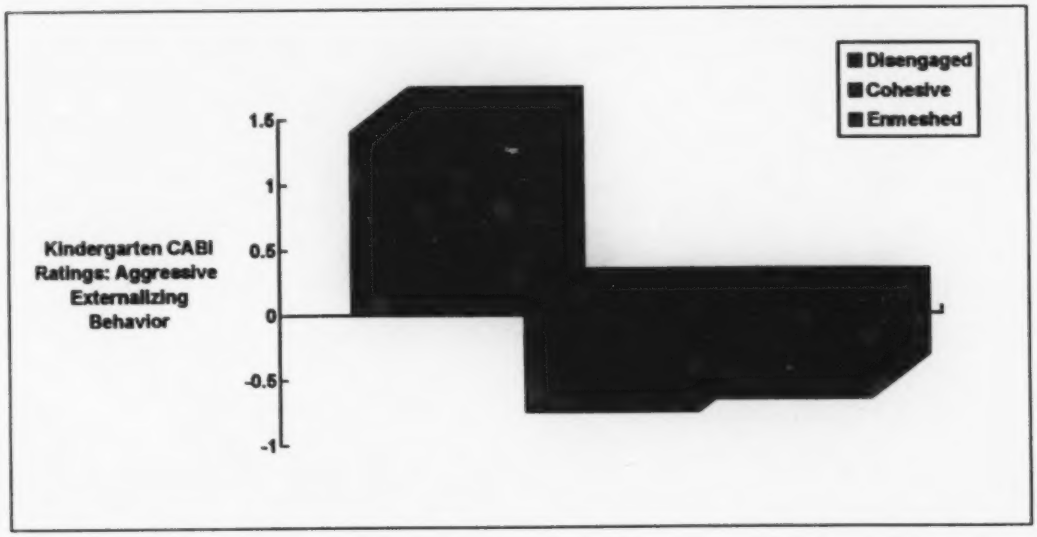
- **Anxious-Depressed Internalizing Behavior, $F(2,66) = 9.26$, $p < .001$**



- **Hyperactive Externalizing Behavior, $F(2,66) = 4.97$, $p < .01$**



- **Aggressive Externalizing Behavior, $F(2,66) = 6.75$, $p < .001$**



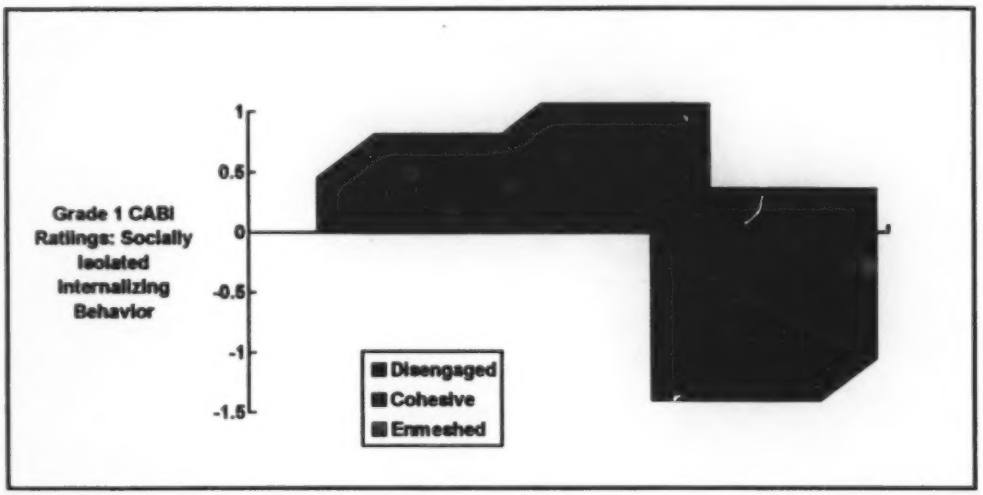
- Compared to families rated by mothers as either disengaged or enmeshed, families rated by mothers as **cohesive** had children who were seen by kindergarten teachers as more **socially competent** ($F(1,79) = 9.49$; $p < .01$), **less hyperactive** ($F(1,79) = 5.76$; $p < .05$), and **less likely to display anxious-depressed internalizing behaviors** ($F(1,79) = 7.24$; $p < .01$).

- Families rated by mothers as **disengaged** had children who were seen by their kindergarten teachers as displaying **more aggressive externalizing behavior** than children from cohesive or enmeshed families ($F(1,79) = 4.00$; $p < .05$).

- No main effects were found for fathers' reports of family cohesion and children's social competence in kindergarten.

Grade 1. Family environment was also found to be associated with teacher reports of children's social behavior in grade 1. Main effects for mothers' reports of family cohesion were found for children's socially isolated internalizing behavior:

- **Socially Isolated Internalizing Behavior, $F(2,49) = 6.27$, $p < .001$**



- Families rated by mothers as **enmeshed** had children who were seen by their first grade teachers as displaying **less socially isolating internalizing behavior** than children from disengaged or cohesive families ($F(1,62) = 7.34$, $p < .01$).

In order to determine whether parent ratings of whole family environment were accounting for unique variance in children's social adjustment to kindergarten and first grade over and above parenting styles assessed in dyadic parent-child interaction sessions, a second set of identical ANOVAs were calculated post-hoc, controlling for mothers' and fathers' pre-kindergarten parenting styles and for intervention condition. To conserve power, separate but identical ANOVAs were calculated for each of the four parenting style factors for both mothers

and fathers (i.e., 8 ANOVAs for each of dependent measure). Post hoc ANOVAs were computed only for the significant findings reported above. **In all cases, parents' perceptions of whole family environment accounted for a significant percentage of the variance in children's social adjustment to school.**

DISCUSSION

Conclusions:

- **No significant relationship was found between parents' reports of family cohesion and children's academic adjustment to school.**
- **Mothers' perceptions of family cohesion were related to children's social adaptation to kindergarten and first grade even after dyadic assessments of parenting styles were accounted for.**
- **A curvilinear relationship was found between family cohesion and children's social adaptation to kindergarten in which moderate levels of family cohesion were optimal.**

Consistent with the family systems notion that whole family functioning is influential in individual development, results from the present study indicate that the effects of prekindergarten family environments are apparent in teacher reports of children's social competence in both kindergarten and first grade. **In kindergarten, children in families described as cohesive by their parents were seen by their teachers as more socially competent, and less hyperactive, aggressive, and anxious-depressed than children in disengaged or enmeshed families.** These results support Olson's (1993) position that moderate levels of family cohesion are optimal.

Despite this curvilinear trend during kindergarten, a linear relationship was found between mothers' reports of family cohesion and children's social isolation in first grade. Children in families rated by mothers as enmeshed (highest ratings of family cohesion) were seen by teachers as less socially isolated than their peers. Lastly, results from the present study indicate that family level processes as perceived by parents are predictive of children's social adjustment to kindergarten and first grade even after accounting for mothers' and fathers' parenting styles as observed in parent-child dyads.

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